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A desirable approach and sequence for the presentation of rhetorical principles to students of junior high school age is outlined. Principles of invention, logical ordering, strategy, and style are discussed with special reference to writing models, developing skills of observation, audience consideration, and precise diction. Specific objectives are listed. (AF)

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# Some Rhetorical Considerations for Teaching the Young Writer

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IN ALMOST any issue of *College Composition and Communication*, and frequently in *College English* and the *English Journal*, there are several articles championing the cause of rhetoric. Such writers as Wayne Booth, Jim Corder, Albert Kitzhaber, Richard Ohmann, Douglas Porter, Robert Stevick, and Karl Wallace argue for writing courses which emphasize rhetorical principles, courses which focus on the aspects of effective written discourse as contrasted with those which focus primarily on grammar and mechanics in writing or on literature. Although these writers probably agree with the findings in *Research in Written Composition*[2] that we do not yet know enough about the writing process to state at which levels of maturation certain elements of rhetoric should be introduced, or even which elements of rhetoric are most helpful in learning to write effective English prose, they agree with Kitzhaber's statement in "4C and Freshman English" (*CCC*, 14 [1963] 134) that it is better for a writing program to include the principles of rhetoric that are easily identified in good prose than to "proceed as if no such principles exist."

Robert Stevick further points out in "Is English Composition Only For Americans?" (*CCC*, 12 [1961], 237-38) that it makes little difference in a student's ability to write if he does not receive instruction in the mechanics of standard written English. But it does make a difference "if the student is not instructed in The Paragraph—The Sentence—The Word, or if he does not have tuition in the broad rhetorical types of definition, classification, inference, sufficiency of evidence, and the like."

But, simply because a course is based upon or emphasizes rhetorical principles is no reason to assume that students will learn to write acceptable prose. One of the major faults of writing instruction, even in those programs which are limited to the teaching of writing through rhetoric, is that instruction requires a student to struggle with all or nearly all of the aspects of rhetoric – invention, logical ordering, strategy, and style – at once. Too often the student is confronted with the entire course in the first chapter of his writing text or in the first three lectures of his instructor. Matters pertaining to reader and purpose, to organization, to sentence structure, and to diction are thrown at the student all at one time. Even if his text uses the word, the sentence, the paragraph approach (or the opposite approach), the student is expected in his writing to worry about more than one aspect even while working in the first chapter.

What I would like to suggest here is that if students are to learn to write acceptable English prose, the aspects of rhetoric will have to be broken up into a number of small segments, and each segment will have to be arranged in a

[1] The author is this year engaged in doctoral studies at Florida State University.

[2] Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer, *Research in Written Composition* (Champaign: National Council of Teachers of English, 1963), pp. 38-39.

logical sequence. Students will have to practice each step in the sequence until that step is mastered before moving on to the next. The sequence will have to be based upon a clear analysis of what student behavior is desired. Such a procedure of teaching one thing at a time, based upon a clear analysis of objectives, is the only way of ensuring that students will learn to write acceptable prose.

The desired outcomes of a composition program include the student's ability to:

1. recognize the order of importance of ideas and to relate ideas to one another.
2. think critically about the nature and treatment of content in composition.
3. see that purpose determines form, content, and manner of treatment.
4. draw valid inferences and conclusions from materials used in composition.
5. use complete, coherent sentences.
6. write coherent paragraphs and compositions of several paragraphs.
7. follow the accepted conventions in grammar, usage, and mechanics.

A student who satisfactorily demonstrates these abilities can be said to write acceptable prose.

In developing the steps to bring about these outcomes, consideration must be given to what will immediately help the young writer. They need, first of all, instruction in the ordering of the ideas they have. A young writer needs to find success in writing, and he can find this success in his early efforts if he learns some techniques for arranging the ideas he has. Once he has mastered the techniques for ordering his experiences, he is more likely to realize the necessity for becoming concerned about other aspects of rhetoric. Such an approach does not suppose that form is more important than content, nor does it propose to teach form in isolation from matter and material. Instead, it assumes that if young writers are given topics which elicit their actual experiences they will have material which needs to be ordered.

## Use Models of Patterns

A writing curriculum, then, should first of all emphasize the typical patterns of organizing thoughts into paragraphs, because this appears to be the most troublesome for the average young writer. The methods of development (chronological, spatial, general to specific, example and illustration, comparison and contrast) should be introduced to the writer through models. Good models are an indispensable aid to both teaching and learning if used inductively and if the student is asked to make generalizations about the development of the model. Any other approach is merely another prescription for the student to learn. In the first phase of the program, the assignments should be based upon what Jonathan Bishop in "Criteria for an Adequate Composition Course" (*CCC*, 10 [1959] 243-48) calls the "criterion of experience." The assignments ask the student to write about actual experiences, experiences which are recent and common to other members of his peer group.

This approach asks the student to compare a paragraph he has written with the model, to identify the organizational ways in which his paragraph differs from the model, and, in a second paragraph, to imitate in his own writing the organizational method of the model. The models for study should, as Hans Guth notes in *English Today and Tomorrow* (p. 367), "typically not be an exceptional paper so far ahead of most students . . . as to be clearly beyond their reach." Once the student has mastered the basic methods for ordering and developing his ideas, he is ready to learn how the subject matter of his writing can be improved. He is ready to focus upon the invention aspect of rhetoric. Success in writing will usually motivate the student to learn more about how he can improve his writing.

Since instruction in rhetoric aims at developing the students' confidence and skill in writing something worth reading, the instruction "must sharpen their powers of observation and develop their ability to select and order information and ideas" (Guth, p. 205). In part, students' powers of observation can be developed through focused discussion on topics chosen for composition. Listening to what other members of the class have to say about a specific topic will often give a student new insights. If the class discussion is kept to the point, students will see the need for thinking before speaking. Here Richards' schematic idea of methodology might be employed. Beginning with whatever seems to be the most pertinent aspect of a problem, the writer examines it and then moves on to the next aspect of the problem and continues to move from one to another until he finally finds the one which leads him into the topic.

## Develop Skills of Observation

Powers of observation can be increased through exercises which force the student to work with the five senses. Sixth- and seventh-grade students, in particular, profit from such exercises. Writing a single sentence (centered in such topics as fall, a football game, walking in the rain) for each of the senses will increase powers of observation. Models too, may be used. If three or four models on the same topic are studied, students will quickly see that there is no one "answer" to a composition topic. When the students have written paragraphs on a topic, the papers can be exchanged to illustrate the many ways of attacking a topic.

Once the student begins to realize the need for discovering what he knows about a topic before he writes, for finding material in personal experience, simple outline techniques may be presented. Since he already knows certain basic methods of organization, he should not find it difficult to put his ideas into an informal outline with a controlling sentence of some sort. There is little value in having the student outline someone else's paragraphs or underline topic sentences in model paragraphs at this time. Later, as he becomes familiar with the major rhetorical skills, such an approach might well be used.[3] But at this stage, the study of outlining and topic sentences should be confined to the ideas presented by the student.

Perhaps the last step in teaching invention at this time should be one that helps the young writer avoid approaches which lend themselves to endless moralizing and easy platitudes. Through discussions or group writing exercises, the student can be led to discover the inherent dangers in such approaches. He must realize that only that writing which comes out of his experience has validity.

The student should now be able to discover profitably some of the principles which underlie strategy or "the rhetorical stance," as Wayne Booth terms it. It depends, Booth states in "The Rhetorical Stance" (*CCC*, 14 [1963] 139-45), "on discovering and maintaining in any writing situation a proper balance among three elements that are at work in any communicative effort: the available arguments about the subject itself, the interests and peculiarities of the audience, and the voice, the implied character of the speaker." Through his study of invention, the student has come to understand, in part, the available arguments about a subject. He is now ready to learn how reader and purpose determine, to some extent, content and form.

## Write with Audience in Mind

The necessity for considering his audience can be demonstrated to the student by asking him to study the differences in the writing of two models on the same topic—one written for an audience of

[3] See Margaret E. Ashida and Leslie T. Whipp, "A Slide-Rule Composition Course," *College English*, 25 (October 1963), 18-22.

elementary school children and one for an audience of adults. By having the student write two paragraphs on the same topic but directed to two different audiences he will soon realize the importance of considering his audience before he writes. The young writer cannot be expected to see all the implications involved in a consideration of audience, but he certainly can learn why he must take them into consideration.

Much the same procedure can be followed in leading the student to discover how purpose helps determine form. Through a study of models treating the same topic but having different purposes, the student will begin to realize why it is important to have this in mind before he begins to write. Such exercises as explaining the actions of a literary character in a particular episode to someone who has read the selection and then to someone who hasn't read it will aid the student in understanding both reader and purpose. Practice in forming controlling sentences which clearly illustrate purpose will also help the young writer to understand how purpose helps determine form. As the young writer begins to understand these two rhetorical principles, his assignments can become more complex; he might be asked to write two paragraphs, one in which he explains an idea and one in which he attempts to convince or to persuade his reader about the idea. Whatever the approach used, the student must be made to realize that purpose is as important as the main idea and often inseparable from it. He should clearly determine his purpose before he forms his topic or controlling sentence.

Having learned some of the elementary principles of invention, logical ordering, and strategy, the young writer is ready to look at a few of the elements of style. *Style*, according to Walker Gibson in *The Limits of Language* (p. 104), is "the expression of a personality." Style is the *way* in which thought is expressed in writing. And an effective style grows out of an author's thoughts; it cannot be super-imposed upon them. Thus a writer must have something to say before he considers the style in which to say it. The earlier experiences in the program presented here have helped the student to have something to say. Now he is ready to consider how language can help him say it more effectively. For a student, style is taken to mean a writer's use of language. Porter Perrin, in discussing style for the student writer in *Writer's Guide and Index to English* (1950 ed., p. 773), states that "the connotation of style is the effectiveness of expression (rather than of description of usage or questions of correctness)." For the young writer, style will refer especially to the words and expressions which he may choose from the resources his language offers.

## Develop Precision in Diction

One of the first aspects of style that the young writer can begin to master is precision in diction. He should learn to rely more upon exact nouns and verbs to replace the over-worked adjectives, adverbs, and intensifiers which he typically leans upon. Once again, good models but models within his ken will aid the writer in discovering the need to become conscious about his style. If two or three models of varying style but treating the same topic are studied, the young writer will see that there are differences in style. If the models and the discussions about the models are limited to the effectiveness of precision in diction, the student will hopefully become concerned about his own diction. He will attempt, if he is given some guidance, to be more precise in his choice of words.

But here the program of instruction will quickly break down unless the young writer receives some instruction in the areas of abstraction and definition. If the study of certain aspects of semantics is introduced at this point, the student will be aided in writing more clearly and ac-

*(Continued on page 737)*

## Some Rhetorical Considerations for Teaching the Young Writer

*(Continued from page 723)*

curately. Through semantics the student can develop an understanding about: (1) the basic process by which meaning is assigned to words, (2) the effect words can have upon the thinking and language habits of individuals, and (3) even, perhaps, the basic processes of communication. By introducing semantics here in connection with his writing, instead of at the beginning of the program, the young writer will be able to see how such a study will enable him to improve his writing.

When some of the elementary principles of semantics have been taught, the student will have completed the first cycle of the writing program. He has learned those elements of invention, logical ordering, strategy, and style which are most useful to him in his writing. He is ready to begin the next cycle, a cycle which will present more complex principles of invention, logical ordering, strategy, and style. An approach such as that considered here, may be viewed as the first of a series of increasingly sophisticated cycles, each cycle presenting more complex principles of the various aspects of rhetoric.

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